What is an inception phase?

An inception phase, also known as the discovery phase, is a set of pre-work activities run collaboratively with cross-disciplinary teams to ensure we have enough information to start work with the best possible chance of success.

This range of activities includes (but is not limited to) validating and aligning on expected outcomes, clarifying scope; identifying dependencies; defining ways of working; exploring technical feasibility; and planning the subsequent delivery.

If inceptions have just one job to do, it's to de-risk delivery by ensuring you know what you are doing, doing it the right way and have everything in place so you can hit the ground running.

Ambitious initiatives need teams to work together well, and as we all know, successful relationships are built on empathy and trust. Inceptions are a great way to form the connections that create the foundations of trusted relationships.

Most importantly, we achieve alignment by getting the right people in the room and asking the right questions in the right way.

What do we want to achieve?

How do we get there?

Which areas to treat with caution?

Why Do I need an inception phase?

The most common root causes for problems during projects are misaligned values and expectations, overlooked risks, missed dependencies and unsophisticated approaches to managing uncertainty and complexity. The most frustrating thing is when that pain could have easily been avoided.

The complex interplay of people, processes and technology will always bring change, uncertainty and unknowns. By acknowledging and addressing these factors early, we can massively reduce the various types of risks we're exposed to.

Imagine suddenly finding an unexpected paralyzing detail that requires a new design and product decisions. Or taking longer than expected to figure out a good UX for your product, or simply wanting to take it slow during the design process to choose the right set of colours representing your brand. This would be both expensive and nerve-wracking having a full-time working team of 6 people.

- Get comprehensive view
- Optimise the cost of development
- Create a clear product vision
- Find competitive edges
- Estimate resources
- Identify and mitigate risks
- Assign priorities

What is the goal of an inception phase?

In short, to know what to do next and the best way.
The discovery phase answers the following questions:

- What must we achieve, and why?
- Do we agree that this is a good thing to do?
- How will we achieve this?
- How long will it take, and how much will it cost?
- What could go wrong?
- What will we do next (and then in the mid/long term)?
- What do we need in place to start?
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In answering these questions, we create a range of deliverables. These help us call on whether to continue and, if so, how we can hit the ground running. Inceptions are not anti-agile. We often need a light plan to tell the team what to do next. Having a plan, a timeline and a cost estimate also empower our clients with data to make better-informed decisions.

Successful inception will give us enough insight to decide on whether to:

- **Continue with the initiative:** Where we decide to continue, an inception phase results in a statement of the problem and solution, as well as the delivery approach and plan.
- **Pivot**: When we decide to pivot, we may need to run discovery to validate the new problem statement and then run lighter inception to de-risk delivery.
- **Stop:** This can often be hard due to the sunk cost fallacy or good old politics. But sometimes, this is the right thing to do. When we decide to stop, it's a good idea to provide a bit of space for the team to process the implications.

If we decide that the right thing to do is to continue with delivery, we will generally create deliverables covering the following:

- Goals and scope - What we will do and why
- Solution approach - What the solution will look like and how we will deliver it, covering functional and technological aspects, as well as processes and ways of working
- Risks and dependencies - Where to be careful
- Plan and cost - An overview of when to expect what, and the required capabilities and resources
- Playback deck - A summary of findings and recommendations
- These deliverables will be reasonably high level with just enough detail to make the call and shape the overall delivery. There is often more detail for the very first iteration so we can hit the ground running.

How is the process going to take place?

Set-up

- We define what communication channels and frequency of calls. This is especially important to provide structure to the inception and have effective communication.
- Being explicit as to what you can expect from us and what we expect from you (response time, knowledge, scope of the inception)
- We present to you all the team involved
- We gather up all the information provided by you, making sure we have everything we need. If we need something, we will ask in advance (API keys, access to a beta app, definitions, etc.).

Research
We will identify what components/modules need research and how deep we need to dive into them. For the sake of saving us time, we will make sure at all points that you haven't already dug into this topic.

Check-In
We will check in with you several times to ensure we are considering all requirements and nothing is being left on the table.

Design
We will put into context everything that's been learned in a design, understanding that some parts of it might be "black boxes". We will ensure we are de-risking the most complex modules and that the overall risk of the outstanding "black boxes" is limited.

Estimate
We will provide an estimate of the time & resources of the system design. This will be peer-reviewed. The estimate will also include a detailed list of deliverables and estimated time for each.

Wrap-up
We will provide a document with a conclusion of our research, a comparison between technologies, technical decisions, recommendations, possible issues and worst-case scenarios, workarounds, etc. The document will also include architecture diagrams and a Gantt chart for easy visualization.

We will then prepare an agenda and a small presentation to jump on a call with you and share the conclusions of the inception phase.

What we expect from our partners

Fluid, fast communication
This is crucial for avoiding any delays in our research. Communications should take place in a collaborative space in which many stakeholders can read and provide input, preferably in Slack.

Dedication
We need at least 1 point of contact or decision-maker dedicated to taking our questions and relaying them to the corresponding stakeholders in the team.

Decisions

The inception phase is a period in which we challenge many previous business decisions and stress test your ideas. Many times this requires opening the way for new concepts or ideas.
We need you to be ready and willing to make decisions within the inception phase. This is to ensure our final estimate corresponds to a limited scope.

Avoid broadening the scope
Recognising which things are crucial for our project and which ones can wait is key for our Principal Engineers to focus on what matters the most.

Why is an inception phase essential?

While increasingly more and more clients and teams get it, we sometimes get questioned when we propose running inception. This is how we respond:

How do I explain it to my colleagues?
Inception is a lightweight set of activities to align on what we will achieve and how we will get there. It's the minimum amount of work needed to deliver the right thing. We'll look at people, processes, scope, technology, risks, dependencies, constraints etc.

This sounds expensive. Is it worth it?

The upfront cost of inception is outweighed multiple times by the cost of potentially building the wrong thing.
What's the impact if we find out in 6 months that we need to start again?
What if we could have identified and mitigated this risk during inception?
We have ambitious deadlines – is it worth spending time just talking about what we want to do?
You're right: this is why we will only focus on the core questions we need answers to get the team started on delivery.
The time needed will vary depending on the size of the challenge and can be broken into smaller workshops.

Why don't we share delivering in Sprints right away?
Not entirely: inceptions aren't a project phase but a set of activities we run before (and during) delivery. We only go so far with the detail because identifying everything upfront is risky, will affect our agility and likely result in rework.

Is this needed? Our stakeholders are very busy.
Inceptions help us protect your time in the long run. By spending this time upfront, we can reduce specific questions that will come your way throughout delivery.
We'll also need to understand the context around the requirements (what assumptions do we need to validate?) and agree on how we'll work together: both core components of inception.

How can we protect our idea?
We are open to signing an NDA for you to feel safe in our pre-work conversations. However, once we start work, we will sign a binding mutual NDA along with our Statement of Work that will protect your idea and IP at all points.

What happens if we don't continue working with you on the project?
At the end of each phase, we will handle you with a set of deliverables. Whether we continue the journey together or not, you will get documents that will help others pick up the work where we left. At all points, your idea is secret to us, it belongs to you.